**Literature reviews**

(Just a note – things in italic are made up examples)

**So what is a literature review?**

Well at the risk of stating the obvious it is about reviewing published work already carried out that is relevant to your research. Some student reviews, particularly in proposals don’t actually contain very much literature. As a result, they don’t get many marks.

**So why do dissertations have a literature review?**

* The review shows the current state of knowledge and understanding in the area of the research
* It is an opportunity to review and evaluate the existing theory base relevant to the research
* It is an opportunity to synthesize existing work to help improve understanding of the research area
* It is an opportunity to be critical of existing work and to show where different research work either agrees or disagrees and where practical work agrees or disagrees with theory.
* It allows creation of a research gap as it highlights what is not known or understood giving you the opportunity to show how your research will help fill that gap.

**What makes a good review?**

A good review with contain most if not all of the following:

* A good review is not an unstructured descriptive list that simply states what others have found.
* It should tell a coherent story (see more on this below)
* It should synthesize literature by identifying common themes between work
* It should contain theory and where possible relate theory to practice.
* It should highlight differences in understanding or where practical evidence and theory disagree
* It should be critical, attempting to assess the quality and limitations of current work
* It should be relevant to the research objectives and questions so that by the end of reading it, it should be clear why the research question have been posed and why they are worth attempting to answer.
* Good reviews are fully referenced using the Harvard system.
* Good reviews draw on a range of sources and are not over dependent on online sources such as websites.
* Good reviews don’t just focus on old or contemporary sources – they use a mix of the two.
* Good reviews make comparisons between different literatures

**As you are writing the review keep asking yourself:**

* Does the review provide a valuable summary of the current position in terms of theory and practical research into my research area?
* Are key issues in this area identified, including competing theories, key differences in practical findings well as key themes and any major gaps in understanding and theory?
* And finally, is it clear from my review why my research is important?

**Telling the Story**

Good reviews develop logically and make use of headings and sub-headings to help the reader navigate through the literature and to see key points in the story you are trying to tell.

Lots of reviews don’t develop logically so their effectiveness is limited and they don’t score high marks

Think about a review as like a good story – it has beginning, a middle and an end.

**The beginning and the middle**

One way to tell the story might be (*you need more than one line in each section by the way – I am just getting you started!*):

**Firstly** introduce the sector you are going to be studying

*The forestry industry in the UK has grown by x% over the last 10 years ………*

**Then** you introduce the issue

As part of this growth x new workers have been employed but the majority of these are employed on zero hour contracts……….

**Then** go on to explore what is known about zero hour contracts and their impact on motivation generally

*Whilst research is not extensive A and B (2002) researched ……..*

**Then** narrow down and talk about what is known about the impact of zero hour contracts on motivation in the forestry industry or closely related industries

*One specific study on the motivation of forestry workers in relation to zero hour contracts found …..*

**Then** go on to talk about theories that are relevant to your research – in this example motivational ones

**Then** go on to look at how these theories have been applied to real world examples, focusing down on your sector if there any studies that are relevant.

*Very little has been done to apply motivational theory to the forestry industry and its workers. However, a study by ……*

There is no fixed order in which to do these things but in most reviews they all need to be present somewhere. So in terms of the example above you could start with a review of motivational theory then move to the context of zero hour contracts and motivation and then move on to practical studies in your sector of choice. It will do the same job albeit in a different order.

**AS YOU DO ALL OF THIS HAVE IN MIND THE POINTS MADE EARLIER ABOUT WHAT MAKES A GOOD REVIEW**

**The end**

However, you write the story, the end is always the same. The last part of the review should very clearly define what the research gap is and how your proposed research (its objectives and questions) are going to help close that gap. This is key. Creating the gap is not that complex and does not involve lots of work. A straightforward example is shown below.

*A review of practical studies as well as the current theory base shows that little research has been done to understand the impact of zero hour contracts on workers, particularly those in the forestry industry. There is also little research to understand how well key motivational theories apply to this area of interest. The research carried out here attempts to address these limitations. It carried out a survey of workers in six forestry companies to understand the contrasting motivation between permanent and zero-hour staff as well as attempting to apply three key motivational theories to test their applicability in this context.*

**To recap**

You chose the order but remember to include all of the blocks and to put the end at the end!

Finally, why not use a heading to show that one block has come to an end and another is starting.